Chapter Ten
Conclusion

In the last quarter century, few public agencies could match the record of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for reinvention as it transformed itself from the nation's leading dam builder to the nation's leading water resources steward. Some observers admired the agency's commitment and finesse, while others maintained that despite the Corps' best effort to adapt to the environmental era, it still had outlived its usefulness. Regardless, the St. Paul District proved to be one of the Corps' most forward looking districts in its approach to civil works design, protection of wetlands and other Corps' missions. In addition, mirroring the experience of other administrative units of the Corps, the St. Paul District underwent significant organizational change and adopted new ways of doing business in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In its civil works program, the district worked energetically with commissions such as Great River Environmental Action Team and the Upper Mississippi River Basin Commission to improve management of the Upper Mississippi River. The Corps demonstrated sensitivity to the environment, albeit with prodding from environmental groups, in its implementation of the Upper Mississippi River System Environmental Management Program, as well as its efforts to preserve the Higgins' eye mussel. Even as the district pointed to these accomplishments, however, the Corps as a whole faced new questions about its commitment to environmental values following the Inspector General's investigation of the Corps' Upper Mississippi River-Illinois Waterway Navigation Study.

Outside of the Upper Mississippi River Environmental Management Program, the St. Paul District faced a decline in workload for civil works as large dam projects were curtailed – indeed, interrupted in mid-construction in the case of the La Farge Dam – due to environmental concerns. The district adjusted to the environmental era by developing a workload that involved smaller, more numerous, and less environmentally destructive projects. Communities continued to look to the Corps for assistance in flood control, but the district responded with measures that were more modest in scale. It also touted nonstructural solutions such as moving buildings out of the flood plain and modifying land uses so that communities were less exposed to flood damages. In the case of the La Farge Dam, the St. Paul District mothballed a project that had already cost $18 million and was forty percent complete. After several years of litigation, the Corps finally officially abandoned the project and mitigated its effects by assisting the State of Wisconsin and the Ho-Chunk Indian Nation in the development of a nature reserve on that section of the Kickapoo River.

Although the St. Paul District no longer proposed large dam and reservoir projects for flood control, it continued to respond to communities' requests for flood protection. Adapting to new cost-sharing approaches mandated by WRDA-86, the district worked successfully with cities such as Rochester, Minnesota, and Grand Forks/East Grand Forks on the North Dakota-Minnesota state line to construct flood control projects under elaborate cooperative agreements. Indeed, new federal guidelines required local communities to take greater initiative, and the district's protracted negotiations with the neighboring communities of Grand Forks/East Grand Forks demonstrated the increased level of public review and political coalition building that the Corps had to undertake in order to secure large civil works projects in this new era.

The environmental era posed new opportunities for the Corps, as well as challenges to its traditional mission of waterway improvements for navigation and flood control. The St. Paul District implemented new Corps' responsibilities with zeal, in part to take the place of civil works projects. After the Corps received the duty of regulating the nation's wetlands, for example, the St. Paul District pioneered a major innovation in the Section 404 program by revising regulatory boundaries to conform to state lines. This enabled the Corps to work in close cooperation with the Wisconsin and Minnesota DNRs on wetlands protection. With the aid of the states, the district improved public compliance with the regulatory program.

But the public did not readily associate the Corps with the protection of wetlands. Section 404 permitting was somewhat of a thankless task, for it incurred the irritation of many landowners and developers who saw excessive government red tape in the Corps' handling of tens of thousands of permits annually. Given the large number of wetlands under its jurisdiction and the strong inclination of farming communities to accept agricultural practices that harmed wetlands, the St. Paul District had an exceptional responsibility for environmental protection. Increasingly, the St. Paul District had to mediate differences between urban dwellers who valued biodiversity in the surrounding countryside and rural residents who wanted farmers to prosper even at the cost of destroying wetlands. The St. Paul District sought to balance these competing interests, or in Colonel Badger's telling phrase, to "swim in the middle of the river." In that way, the St. Paul District gained the public's respect, which ultimately helped the Corps win the public's support of a more regulatory environment.

Under the mandate of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the St. Paul District vigorously implemented a cultural resources program and worked assiduously to maintain the district's own history. Using visitor centers, oral history programs and public outreach, the St. Paul District preserved its past and shared it with others. Even as the Corps struggled with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation over Section 106 compliance on regulatory projects, the St. Paul District maintained a positive relationship with the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office. At the same time, district archeologists effectively implemented the Section 106 program on civil works projects and worked with Native American groups to preserve their

history and cultural resources.

Navigation: Kevin Ressie and James Marquardt test the ice thickness on the Mississippi River at Lake Pepin. (Photo by Mark Edlund, courtesy of St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers)

Recreational use of reservoirs and other waterways under the Corps' management increased significantly in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Water sports gained popularity, boosting demand for public access to these areas even beyond the increases in recreational use that stemmed from population growth and rising affluence. Managing civil works projects for recreational use was not new to the St. Paul District, but it acquired more emphasis in the period since 1975. The recreation program was distinctive because it involved so much interaction with the general public. It entailed issues of public access and visitor safety, as well as outreach programs aimed at encouraging public enjoyment of Corps-built facilities. Public recreation was not as central to the Corps' mission as it was to an agency such as the National Park Service; yet with the amount of water resources under its control, the Corps had to respond to growing public demand for recreational opportunities. The St. Paul District maintained a number of parks connected with dams and reservoirs, and it cooperated with the National Park Service in the management of public recreational use in the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.

The region covered by the St. Paul District is susceptible to drought and flood, and the Corps participated in numerous disaster response actions. Notable flood fights included efforts to protect communities along the Red River in 1978, 1979, 1989 and 1997, and the response to the epic Midwest flood of 1993. St. Paul District personnel participated in disaster relief operations outside the district as well, notably in connection with war-stricken areas in the Middle East and in New York City, following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. During the past three decades, federal disaster relief efforts as a whole grew more costly and complex, raising issues about the role of the federal government in prevention and response. The Midwest floods in particular led to reevaluation of floodplain management.

Like other districts, the St. Paul District reorganized itself and adopted new methods of

operations, both internally and in its relations with other entities, in order to improve efficiency. Cost-sharing and project management were two salient programs. The uncertainty and confusion surrounding the reorganization of the Corps took a human toll, but it also produced bursts of creativity – as evidenced by several award-winning designs produced by the St. Paul District staff – and a stronger organization. In the area of human resources, a noteworthy accomplishment of the district was the number of women who had attained senior staff positions at the end of the twentieth century.

This recent history of the St. Paul District has emphasized two themes: the relative success of the Corps of Engineers in responding to environmentalism and the pressure on the Corps to adopt new business practices as part of a wider effort to reform federal government. Looking ahead, it appears likely that both the public concern for the environment and the search for efficiencies in government will continue to dominate Corps' administration in the next few decades of the twenty-first century. The Corps will be involved with two key environmental concerns in the future: climate change resulting from global warming and pressures on land use from continuing population growth. Long-range projections of the national debt suggest there will be a continuing struggle over the federal budget. The St. Paul District will no doubt face challenges, but these are challenges that it has capably handled during the past twenty-five years.